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ABSTRACT

Education continues to operate as an enclave of elite culture and is battling for interest and respect with the mass media, technology, and the popular arts. These cultures must be brought together. Using the creative ideas generated by theme parks is an effective method of importing popular culture into the schools. Theme parks provide a total learning environment and are highly successful as evidenced by 50 million visitors a year. For an audience raised on television, they provide an ideal setting for education, offering innovations for the classroom and combining fantasy, history, adventure, and learning. The classroom cannot compete with the world of popular culture with its creative imagination and enormous resources. Theme parks influence design, merchandising, and computer-assisted education, serving as modern museums and centers of historic preservation, where children can acquire history, lore, and myth. As a major acculturation method, theme parks are evocative as opposed to literal and make participants out of the viewer. They are knowledge clusters of exhibits, science, and communications; and they provide a visual, tactile, and kinetic message about recent scientific information. A review of scholarly literature published on theme parks and a discussion of concepts and influences concludes the document. (NL)

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Instruction and Delight:

Theme Parks and Education

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November 1989

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November 22, 1989

Instruction and Delight:

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"The lecturer who puts his students to sleep looks with a jaundiced eye on the man who keeps them bolt upright, who tries to entertain them as he teaches so as to make what is taught memorable and colorful."

-- William Sloan

The Craft of Writing, 1979

"Knowledge is important, but imagination is more important than knowledge."

-- Albert Einstein

Experts, educators, and educatees alike agree that American education is in trouble. SAT and ACT scores have been on the decline for some years and there is widespread concern about how low they will go as well as when and why. There is also agreement that education is not going to get any better without some dramatic changes. The current popularity of such critiques as Allan Bloom's Closing of the American Mind and John Allen Paulos's Innumeracy testifies to this anxious state of affairs in the teaching arts.

The challenges to education in the information age are stern. No longer is it enough merely to inform. Education is now called upon to teach forms of judgment, discrimination, values, analytical skills, and problem solving never before imagined and well as something even more rare: to show people of all ages how to learn. The

traditional trio of classroom. textbook, and teacher is simply no longer equal to the task. Nonetheless, education continues to operate as an enclave of elite culture battling for interest and respect in a universe of mass media, high technology, and the popular arts--the ecology of everyday life. What is called for is some way of bringing into better confluence these "two cultures" that have increasingly diverged over the past century. Creatively applying the tremendous success of theme parks and related forms offers perhaps the brightest prospect for this critical integration.

In "The Death of Good Taste," a lecture sponsored by the Clemson University Architectural Foundation, Dr. Roger Rollin suggested teaching some connections between War and Peace and Star Wars. "Moreover," Rollin noted, "it would seem to make sense to provide students with some of the intellectual tools they badly need to understand their popular culture....And we in humanistic education bear a major responsibility for helping people maximize their cultural options...." [1]

Imports from popular culture into schools is one leading-edge development. Television and computers are just two examples, but even more pervasive are the total environments of Disneyland and Walt Disney World -- the theme parks. The rich fusion of entertainment and education at the Disney parks --and related "megaparks" -- has been the basis of intense debate. The spatial free association of ideas that was for so long possible only in images and words has now developed, with high technology, into a three-dimensional artform. And though a stroll through Disneyland or World happens within a planned environment, the guest can endlessly vary the journey according to mood and interest. The quality and meaning of this experience has recently become the focal point for the museum and educational

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1 Roger Rollin. "The Death of Good Taste." Revised version of a public lecture sponsored by the Clemson University Architectural Foundation. Clemson, SC, 1987.

"events" world, where theme parks are being considered as a design model for attracting and engaging the visitor.

For a cultural audience raised on television, with a technological rather than a traditional humanities view of the world, theme parks offer the ideal setting and inspiration for education. Many of the innovations taken for granted as part of classroom and museum education enhancements, such as multimedia events, were born at the theme parks.

Education is hailed by theme parks as a central mission. "Disneyland," says the official brochure, "combines fantasy, history, adventure, and learning." Roy Disney's summation of Walt Disney World's outlook makes a similar claim: "May Walt Disney World bring joy and inspiration and new knowledge to all who come to this happy place [where all] can laugh and play and learn together."[2]

The Disney penchant for educating widely and well has always stayed several moves ahead of the priorities shift in U.S. education. Since the 1960s, the emphasis has been away from knowledge-building and analytical thinking as taught through the motifs of history and literature: the linear landscape of cause and effect, motive and action, personality and destiny prescribed in the study of warfare, economics, romance, and the search for the fulfillment of empire and self. New models of intelligence based on research in problem-solving and creativity have induced a fresh new agenda of curiosity, imagination, discovery, invention, and innovation. Suddenly students are being summoned to think in new paradigms (imagining scenarios like a nuclear holocaust or the eradication of all disease), to invent new solutions ("design the tallest building possible out of paper"), and to operate interactively (solving medical problems in trouble-shooting student teams rather than simulating solo practitioners).

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2 Quoted in Robert B. Pettit, "Disney Theme Parks as Shrines of the American Civil Religion." Popular Culture Association annual meeting, Atlanta, GA, 1986.

E. Paul Torrance and Kathy Goff, researchers in creativity education, have declared, "Many educators have not fully recognized that changes in the direction of more creative education have occurred....Practically every curriculum reform during the last 30 years has moved education in the U.S. to be more creative in nature.[3] (1989)

Entertainment as Education

Walt Disney has been called "the greatest educator of the twentieth century." In this oft-quoted accolade, Max Rafferty, Superintendent of Education for the State of California, was recognizing the power of the Disney enterprise to do far more than entertain. He saw in Disney's films, television, and print, and then in the theme park, the hand and mind of a creative innovator whose power drew on the American family audience's interest in learning, an impetus that closely parallels the desire to travel and explore other worlds, eras, and minds.

This perception about the nature of education has paid off many times over. Disney's genius for educating by starting with what is already known follows a well-known precept of teaching and of popular culture alike--consumer or student-oriented teaching. As Richard Beard put it in his book on Epcot, "The organization that Walt fostered is a wizard at giving people facts they enjoy and remember."[4] It would certainly be safe to say that Disney has enjoyed more influence than anyone has suspected in educating every generation of Americans since the 1930s.[5] Certainly as the artistic director of a major multi-talented enterprise--as filmmaker, artist, businessman, and creator of the City of the Future--Disney can readily be construed as America's Dean of Applied Creativity.

In the mass media age what we learn and what our children learn is most often absorbed outside the classroom: through magazines, sports, films, computer

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3 E. Paul Torrance and Kathy Goff, "A Quiet Revolution," Journal of Creative Behavior, 23:2, 1989, pp. 139-140.)
4 Richard Beard. Epcot Center: Creating the New World of Tomorrow. NY: Harry Abrams, 1982, p. 35.

games, rock concerts, theme parks, malls, and shopping (now the major leisure activity in the U.S.) and through the sociable interchange that goes with all these. Time allotted to reading and formal instruction, of course, lags far behind these pursuits. Without a total re-thinking and overhaul, the classroom can no longer compete with the wide wonderful world of popular culture. The "Never-Never Land" of the theme park, the stagey themed atmospheres of restaurants and malls (which have now become major socialization centers), and the drama of both large and small screen are simply far more attractive, stimulating, and engaging.

Education begins with delight, with engagement, with the ring of the familiar. Teaching aids can be traced from designs first conceived for entertainment. After their integration into home life, the stereopticon and magic lantern of the late nineteenth century, followed by the Kodachrome slide, videodisk, and video game, have all made the migration from parlor and den into the halls of academe for a "second career" in education.[5] The first breath was drawn in enjoyment, not pedagogy.

Following the same fashion, formal education is already turning to alternatives in a quest to make the classroom a "learning center" rather than a traditional library/lecture hall/museum: video-assisted instruction, part-time programs, flexible schedules, field study, home learning through television and computers. From their inception, theme parks posed the groundwork for alternative (or at least supplementary) educations. Thirty years later and now more fully developed as a communications media in themselves, these alternative "academies" offer both challenges and promises to ideas about how people can be induced to explore, to learn, and to remember.

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5 Rod Murray, Director of the Office of Academic Computing, made this observation in his November 1989 progress report to the Thomas Jefferson University Medical College (Philadelphia) based on the university archival collection.

As time-honored extensions of the schoolroom, museums are naturally drawn to these advancing formats, and are emerging as a leading component in public education--sometimes complementing, sometimes being handed roles to take over from the overworked school curriculum (especially in the sciences). In Philadelphia, for example, the Franklin Institute's Futures Center, with its interactive science garden, hands-on-exhibits, and heavy computer use, will be in the forefront of this evolution of the "museum of the future" movement.

Since the mid-1950s, the Disney Corporation has pioneered and perfected the novel art form of themeing, a total sociology and aesthetic, which has been raised to a new height with the opening of EPCOT's Future World and World Showcase in the early 1980s.[6] Although often considered simply a form of highly successful mass entertainment, the theme park (or "atmospheric park," which it has also been called)[7] has generated an ever-widening circle of influences, ranging from town planning and historic preservation to building architecture, mall design, and merchandising to home and office decor, exhibit design, crowd management, and video- and computer-assisted education. Inspired and propelled by thematic applications of technology and the use of themed motifs in decor, the extension of set design, and flights of fancy (along archetypal routes) in symbolic and fantastic architecture, the "Disney effect" is making itself seen and felt across the cultural board. As unlikely as it may seem at first blush, the models of many contemporary notions about the way public spaces should look and feel trace back to the gateways

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6 Disney has been particularly instrumental as a "translator" of European children's literature into American plots and images (as can be seen in Fantasyland) to the extent that many Americans believe these tales to be original Disney creations. Disney's creation and re-cycling of American heroes is another key study: see Margaret J. King, doctoral dissertation, "The Davy Crockett Craze: A Case Study in Popular Culture." Dept. of American Studies, U. of Hawaii, 1976.

7 Richard Schickel, The Disney Version. NY: Simon & Schuster, 1968, p. 13.

of the Disney parks. This includes the dimensions, kinetics, textures, sounds, and other character traits of the (other) places we go to encounter the world in stylized form: the Madonna Inns, Food Courts, Donut Worlds, and Magic Time Machine Restaurants, as well as the thousands of McDonald's outlets keyed to local themes.

Themeing

Throughout nearly three and a half decades of conception, development, and evolution, theme parks have exerted a surprisingly disproportionate effect on American culture -- both in mainstream and avant-garde endeavors.
It is even possible that, as a result of that influence, there has been no more immediately successful or more all-encompassing art form in human history. Disney's is a multi-experiential approach, melding education, entertainment, food, souvenirs, travel, and other modes to achieve its effects.[8] Consider the attendance figures of 50 million a year to Disneyland, Walt Disney World, and Tokyo Disneyland -- with another eleven million expected to visit EuroDisneyland in Paris after 1992.

The ancestors of the theme park are venerable, including pilgrimage place, fairs, harvest rite, royal pleasure ground, theater, science exposition, history park, world's fair, and museum. The first generation was establishment and matured over a thirty-year period. The spin-off progeny, the second generation, now includes such prominent features of the entertainment landscape as Knotts Berry Farm, Busch Gardens, King's Island, the "Six Flags" parks, Sea World, and Opryland. The third generation theme park offspring are showing up in themed entertainments and exhibitions, restaurant decor, historic redesign and rehabilitation, retirement and resort communities, retail and mall design, main street restoration, and in inventive extensions of and within traditional museums such as the Futures Center.

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8 Allon Schoener, "Can Museums Learn from Mickey and Friends?" New York Times, October 30, 1988, p. 38.

Theme parks serve as modern museums and history parks, often following even better than museums themselves the museum mandate to "endow knowledge, incite pleasure, and stimulate curiosity" (Commission on Museums for a New Century, 1984). Through the device of themeing and its shorthand stylizations of person, place, and thing, an archive of collective memory and belief, symbol, and archetype has been created.

"Imagineering" (a Disney trademark) is the brainpower of themeing: the dynamic synthesis of right- and left-brain talents, merging creativity with technical know-how. "It is precisely in this unique combination that [we have] excelled, and in creating Epcot Center we believe [we] will achieve new dimensions and dynamics in family entertainment and learning experiences," says Martin Sklar, Vice President of Creativity Development for WED Enterprises.[9]

This "bank" of popular culture has earned high interest, both inside and beyond the business of entertainment. It is an account open and available for educators of every style and subject to draw upon.

The following questions suggest themselves for a study of the interface between theme parks and education: What is being learned and taught through themed environments, and how? What is the relationship between education, entertainment, and acculturation? How can themed environments offer inspiration to schools, museums, libraries, and other formal and informal educational/enrichment programs--in their operation and mission alike? What are the issues of education and accuracy versus "promotion," with its stylistic impulses and imperatives, within these environments? And must these forces necessarily be cast as conflicting ones? What are the interactions between popular culture and elite/educational/historic forms in the education process? And finally, how do

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9 Quoted in Beard, p. 25.

theme parks educate, and to what extent has their ability to teach brought them such unprecedented successes?

An appreciation of how various publics are attracted, involved, and educated by theme parks, based on the approach of "themeing" to knowledge complexes, is generic to the innovative connections currently being sought between entertainment and education, in particular the problematic "cross-cultural encounters" between formal and informal education. (For example, in the work of George MacDonald and Stephen Alsford at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, a starring example of a new age museum.)[10] These emerging integrations offer exciting new opportunities and directions for educational institutions of all stripes for the coming century. The gathering wave of world trade, tourism, and migration lends an urgency to these opportunities they have never had before.[11] At the same time, they construct an intellectual theme of growing importance in the world at large: the creative synthesis (or reunification) of popular culture with elite in myriad motifs, trends, subjects, and styles. As a case study, theme parks, rooted in the California and Florida prototypes, are also posing some solutions (or problem-solving frameworks) to some of the central concerns of modern civilization, both Western and international. "The parks transform formidable technology into something we can understand and look forward to enjoying," says Beard.[12]

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10 See for example "The Museum as Hypermedium," "Museums as Bridges to the Global Village," "Museums in the Marketplace," "EPCOT Centre in Museological Perspective," and "The Canadian Museum of Civilization: A Museum for the Global Village" (1987-1989).

11 Margaret J. King. "Theme Parks: Never Land or Tomorrowland?" Museum. (Paris: UNESCO). Publication scheduled for 1990. See also M. King, "Creative Transformations for the 21st Century: Popular Culture, Enrichment, & Education: Museum of the Future." World Futures Society special publication, The Future of Museums. (Washington, D.C.) Summer 1990.

12 Beard, p. 35.

Disney's efforts have often hastened the process by which less advantaged and bookless children in the U.S. have acquired knowledge of history, lore, and myth that were previously held as a cultural monopoly by the better-off. The Disney classroom can be considered as a major acculturation on the American social scene, one that has "levelled up" millions of young by saving them from Dick and Jane banality. There is a price, of course--Disney versions of Snow White and Winnie the Pooh and Bambi may lack that poetic refinement of European verbal and graphic originals. But this issue of quality obtains in all the diffusions of education and literacy and never applied to Disney alone.

Indeed, it can be argued that the two great popularizers of the ecological movement were Rachel Carson (Silent Spring, 1958) and Walt Disney. Who would deny that all attitudes toward animals, wild and tame, natural and fantastic, have been mediated by Disney for at least sixty years?

Even so, it continues to be a point of pride with many American intellectuals that they have never (and refuse to consider) even set foot in any of these places. Analyzing the intellectual underpinnings of theme park content offers tremendous promise for mediating the battle of taste cultures, while showing potential to carry forward the whole enterprise of integrating elite and popular culture modalities.[13]

Concern with the political and social control of Disney's versions of the world--in particular, history, has prompted a generation of criticism based on the selective perception generated by Disney's brand of Midwestern conservatism--although this style, according to his biographers, is best viewed as a conservatism without commitment. These critiques take special aim at the Disney enterprise

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13 The director of a cultural museum recently reported to me that he visited the Bishop Museum of ethnology in Honolulu while he shunned the Polynesian Culture Center, the largest single attraction in the islands, and the main source of popular impressions and beliefs about Polynesia. He came home without ever experiencing the most important source of ideas on his museum's subject area!

because of its special powers over the American mind. This power is attested to by the studios' great success in attracting generation after generation to the Disney oeuvre of film, parks, and merchandising.

Critical anguish is at heart, as Michael Wallace's recent review of Walt Disney as popular historian shows, an aghast perplexity about the state of education under the incursions of popular culture. "Nowadays it often seems as if the past gets presented to popular audiences more by commercial operators pursuing profit than by museums bent on education," says Wallace, "....blurring the line between entertainment center and actual museum."[14] The construction of images and ideas in the Carousel of Progress, American Adventure, and the Hall of Presidents are the sourcebooks for the study of history transformed into popular culture.

Themeing is evocative as opposed to literal. Themeing is an involving form. It makes participants out of viewers. It collapses the traditional distance between the audience and the artifact. Contrast this participatory theory of art with the Western doctrine of art is disengaged, removed, and objectified, as in the conventional art museum, where velvet ropes carefully separate viewers from the thing viewed. Kant even offers the definition of "taste" as "disinterested judgment."

The parks are born of the dramatic, playful, holistic hyperbole of the video arts as contrasted to the cool, detached, analytical mentality of print media and traditional glass-case exhibit. As McLuhan noted in the Medium is the Massage, (1967), environments out of the past become the content of new art forms. Thus the turn-of-the-century Main Street, USA, complete with gazebo and gaslights, becomes the retrograde symbol for the high-tech parks, while the even more ancient medieval castle centered as the crown jewel and polar star. In a similar vein, Disney nature films of the 1950s came to prominence just as the country was moving out of the

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14 Michael Wallace, "Mickey Mouse History: Portraying the Past at Disney World." Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, History Museums in the United States. Urbana: U. of Illinois Press, 1989, pp. 158-180.

countryside to regroup in city and suburb.[15] Both genres have been prime movers in the public's fascination with American history and with ecological issues.

Innovating on a popular culture stage rather than in an avant-garde studio, the Disney "Imagineers" have been leading-edge instigators in researching and developing concepts in the enchanted terrain between art and science. Examples are the arts of audioanimatronics (called "animation in the round"), applications of computers to problems in communication and exhibition, new uses of video disk, electronics, and fiber optics, the remaking of historic artifacts by advanced engineering, the melding of space-age with neotraditional forms and functions, and the future-planning orientation of all park features. This innovation has a very human dimension as well. Walt Disney Seminars is a prominent player in management, marketing, and communications education and consulting, an "excellence" company at the forefront of training school, hotel, hospital, and museum executives as well as front-line workers in a variety of service industries.

In this vein is EPCOT, the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow, at Walt Disney World. Originally planned as a residential community of 20,000, EPCOT combined some of the most advanced thinking in consumer science and ergonomics. Architect Peter Blake remarked in Architectural Forum, "Not even Corbusier at his brashest ever proposed anything so daring."[16]

History and Historiography

Just as the arts have been transformed by science, so have our shared concepts of history been put to the critical test by the "death of history." Vattimo's The End of Modernity asks what, at the end of the doctrine of Progress, awaits us?

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15 See Reuel Denney's new Introduction to the reissue of The Astonished Muse, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1989, for his discussion of animals in American civilization. "In the cinematic media, no one has paid greater attention to animals--first in cartoons and later in natural form--than Walt Disney." (p. lvii).

16 Peter Blake, Architectural Forum (June, 1972), p. 28.

New doctrines are developing--not out of test-tube labs, but at "living history labs" like EPCOT's Future World, and shared symbols of designed environments like Main Street, USA, the gateways to the Disney parks East and West. Richard Francaviglia describes the importance of these recreations as symbol-places to be valued and appreciated as archetypal American experiences[17]--especially in an age in which shared national identity has been weakened at the center and is under many pressures and, many feel, is reaching a breakdown (or meltdown) point. The shared "anamnestic (memory assisting) response" elicited by the parks forms an important bond.

Part of this new tension between past and present is the sheer volume of data with which we are now faced and forced to deal; turning the massive overload of data into intelligence is a prime project for modern man, with pressure points aimed directly on the opinion leaders: our academic institutions, political advisors, and directors of informal education, including museum manager, publisher, religious spokesman, and network executive.

Everywhere there is a great need for more effective ways to organize and process information. The "knowledge clusters" of exhibits such as science (Living Seas, the Land, World of Motion, Wonders of Life), and communications (Communicore), provide a tactile, visual, and kinetic message about recent science information -- as does, in a very immediate manner, the monorail, Mission to Mars. and Space Mountain. Other examples are actual scientific experimentation such as plant cloning in "The Land," which U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Richard Lyng called "the cutting edge of biotechnology" at its dedication in 1988.

The Future

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17 Richard Francaviglia, "Main Street, U.S. A.: A Comparison/Contrast of Streetscapes In Disneyland and Walt Disney World." Journal of Popular Culture, Summer 1981, p. 141-156.

Philadelphia's Franklin Institute Futures Center, opening in 1990, is a design parallel to EPCOT's Future World pavilions following the Disney Method. This $58 million project spearheads the Institute's new momentum (actually a return to its original nineteenth-century mission) toward "an active education." Momentum has been fueled by A Nation at Risk, the Presidential Commission's 1983 report calling for a stepped-up science education.[18]

Historian Kenneth Keniston's incisive essay, "Stranded in the Present,"[19] describes the alienation of youth in the transformational 60s as a function of alienation from history--both past and future. He diagnoses this modern malady as "asynchrony," time sickness, or the psychological loss of connection between generations in an age when the present is so radically different from the past that links to the future are either eroded or invisible. What is needed, Keniston suggests, are techniques beyond simply adapting to change. We need more: to find a way to assimilate change. This much taller order calls upon more universal and eloquent responses than our artists, scientists, or historians have been asked to give us in the past. In answer to these problems in historiography and in personal and social neurosis, this technique must be capable of mediating the "anxiety of historical dislocation" that has accompanied unguided technological and social change. We are planning now for a future that will be obsolete by the time we get there. This technique resides in what Keniston calls "aesthetic outlook," the translation of history into art--one of Disney's most characteristics. (Think also of the many Disney history films, costume dramas that have brought the past to life in the popular imagination.)

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18 Brian McKenna, "The Franklin Institute: Selling the Future." Philadelphia City Paper, January 13-20, 1989, no. 231, p. 1.

19 Kenneth Keniston, "Social Change and Youth in America," in Confrontation. Michael Wertheimer, Ed., Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman, 1970, pp. 40-43.

Theme parks offer an intelligible stability in a world where change has become the rule, not the exception--and the pace of change has accelerated at mind-bending rates. In addition, as a leading intergenerational learning laboratory, they answer many of the concerns of the generation gap. Two, three, and four-generation tour groups come away from the Magic Kingdom and EPCOT with a new bond.

Change Management

In the theme park, historical and cultural archetypes set up a framework of reassurance, creating a safety zone amid the barrage of change. Vital to our mental health is coping with the great terra incognita of the future (including the near future), surely an educational issue of critical importance. Disney's response is a form of effective change management operating in part on the subconscious level of audience awareness. The wide acceptance and support commanded by the realms of Disney is an indication that they are connecting on too many levels and at too many points to be a mere diversion.

What are the key topics with survival value for modern living? An audit of leading themes at Disney's worlds tells the story: (See figure --: map of Magic Kingdoms and EPCOT)

Spatial: The technology of Future World, Tomorrowland

Temporal: History, collective and personal (Adventureland, Frontierland, American Adventure, Main Street, USA, World Showcase)

Psychological: Change and mobility (Future World) in time and space (World Showcase)

Informational: Social, psychic, cross-cultural (Future World, Fantasyland, Tomorrowland, Disney/MGM Studios)

In our world where the possibility of "staying ahead" has long ago disappeared beyond reach, just to know what is going on at any given time and place is an achievement of some magnitude. We can easily identify with Holden Caulfield in Salinger's Catcher in the Rye on his return to the New York Natural History Museum to assure himself that the hunter and deer in the prehistoric diorama are still in position as seen on his childhood visits. We are all feeling to some extent like aliens in our own age and country. The current trend in "fish-out-of-water" films like Back to the Future" testifies to a collective identity crisis.

Theme parks both supplement and compete with museums as stabilizers in this flux of modern change. This makes them especially interesting places to re-visit after having grown up in them. The entire baby boom generation is now in the process of discovering the drama in the "before" and "after" experience and impressions. As the theme park anticipates the future and plunges us into "then," carrying us all with it, it is interesting to note that certain features must in fact be updated. Thus the once-futuristic "Flight to the Moon" (Disneyland) was forced further out into the cosmos as "Mission to Mars" after the moon landing had become history. For the same reason, the "House of the Future" in Tomorrowland quickly become outmoded as one of yesterday's tomorrows.

Post-EPCOT "enclaves of the future," as Alvin Toffler calls them, will have the opportunity to take a lead in futurology by "reverting" to EPCOT's original conception as residential community--a fully functioning experimental "try-out" behavioral laboratory for new hard- and software, with everything from video telephones to home computer networks to moving sidewalks, solar power, and electronic elections.

Popular Culture and Tradition

While the parks are giving us the future, they also have been exemplary in restoring to public life many of the features--and with them, values--now banished

from our megacities and suburbs.[20] Very few American cities can boast horse-drawn streetcars, outdoor cafes, boats and waterways, topiary landscaping, and a leisurely and safe pedestrian way of life. Along its now-famous River Walk, the city of San Antonio, Texas, has re-introduced walking, boating, and sidewalk dining to the heart of a major American metropolis. To this exercise in applied civic themeing, public acclamation has been resounding.

The Disney Experience continues to influence much else in America and now (with Tokyo and Paris models) international life, including the look and feel of our cities, public places, and learning environments. The universality of this tour (along with the integration of television into every aspect of daily life) is the backdrop against which all other attractions must be plotted. The contemporary "grand tour" around the global village could well be a procession from theme park to theme park as self-image crystal balls of far-flung world cultures. Given this premise, there is little practical sense in talking about museum-going, formal education, government programs, or any other communication-rich institution as independent of popular culture and its demands and effects.

Within the wraparound Circlevision or audioanimatronic theaters in Disney's Magic Kingdoms, transporting us to China, the Living Seas, prehistoric forests, or deep inside the mysteries of the human body, there is no distancing oneself from the images, movement, color, and music. These are totally enveloping experiences, sensory and mental, as close to "being there" as can be achieved without teleportation.

Popular culture works as the intermediary between history and its audience, the symbiosis of media event and artifact/architecture in which each feeds on and into the other in creative interplay. These parks are a living demonstration of how

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20 Margaret J. King, "Disneyland and Walt Disney World: Traditional Values in Futuristic Form." Journal of Popular Culture, Summer 1981, pp. 116-140. See also William F. Whyte on destruction of inner city pedestrian values.

popular culture and history can be mutually reinforcing, supporting, and educational. It is never an "either/or" situation, even in the most seemingly "diametric" situations. As a case in point, in a recent issue of American Heritage, managing editor Richard Snow's acutely evocative essay on Disneyland, attributes to his visit there at age 10 a lifelong interest and career in history, calling Disney's Main Street, USA "A triumph of historical imagination."[21] Moving toward the same aesthetic of engagement are the surrogate artifacts, hands-on, and interactive exhibits now part of museum and classroom learning. Disney's sense of intuition, risk-taking, and planning had much to do with setting these wheels in motion.

Archetypes

Comparisons with "literal restoration" history sites such as Williamsburg, Greenfield Village, and Slater's Mill are unavoidable. But in fact it is Disney's imaginative reconstructions, his archetypes based on stereotypes, that have served as inspiration for the Main Street architectural revivals of the 70s. This renaissance was institutionalized as the 1977 Main Street program pioneered by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.[22] The use of archetypes is an intriguing aspect of themeing, because while they engage the visitor by drawing on and linking up with a built-in and built-up set of images about the world, including arts, cultures, peoples, and history, they must also somehow transcend that "flashpoint" to move on into deeper instruction.

The parks are an object lesson in the popular need for a shared vision and symbols of the pastas well as of other places; the need to update these visions to express the cosmology of the present; and their attractiveness as a tangible index to

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21 Richard Snow, "Disney Coast to Coast." American Heritage, Feb/Mar 1987, pp. 22-24.

22 Richard Francaviglia discusses this topic in "After Walt Disney: The Role of Historic Image-Building in the Preservation and Revitalization of Main Street U.S.A," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, St. Louis, MO, April, 1989.

ideas. It is no accident that the future should play its starring role at EPCOT in the late 20th century.

There is an especially active debate around culture parks like the World Showcase at EPCOT, the Polynesian Culture Center, and "real-life" re-creations such as Sturbridge Village. It is within such "hyper-real" environments that the education staff--curator, education director, and exhibit designer--must deliberate on how to carry this focus forward and to fruition once the audience has been effectively captured.

Romanticized and fictional evocations have long enjoyed a lofty status in the novel, play, poem, painting, architecture, and film. In their new manifestation "in the round," they now deserve reevaluation as important historo-cultural mediators.

The archetypes within themed environments can advise as well as caution in this endeavor (the necessary foreshortening of time and space in Adventureland and Frontierland are obvious instances). At a museum directors' planning meeting held at Walt Disney World, Francois Barre, Grand Halle Director at Parc La Villette science museum in Paris, described the Disney World experience as one in which visitors can "rediscover their own memories, even fantasies. They are immersed in a universe where everything was at once true and false; false because it consisted only of background and illusion, but true because it existed in everyone's heart and dreams. It was not just an amusement park, but an environment stimulating new ideas."[23]

The problem with the past is that it must be assimilated with the psychic equipment of the present. History is unruly, rampaging, inscrutable, and inaccessible. Public education faces this problem on a vast scale on a daily routine. The task seems to be, at its source, one of communication: taking the raw materials

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23 Schoener, New York Times, p. 39.

of information and artifacts to weave them into patterns that are orderly, beautiful, engaging, true.

In any event, at whatever level, the picture windows into the past must be set on the terms of the visitor, not the educator. Walt Disney's greatest asset in this regard was his close and unwavering identification with his audience. He was always one of them and never withdrew to a position above the crowd, except perhaps in his charmingly civic conceit of reserving a private apartment for himself above the firehouse on Disneyland's Main Square.

William Thompson, in At the Edge of History, pinpointed the cosmic place of the theme park: "Disneyland is the technological cathedral of the 20th century, as the Gothic cathedral summed up the world in the medieval town."[24] An ironic measure of Disney's place in the American mind is the answer to the question of what man-made structure can be seen from the moon. The response is just as often "Spaceship Earth at Walt Disney World" (Buckminster Fuller's geodesic globe at the entrance of Future World) as the correct answer, which is the Great Wall of China. Of course it is understood that the universe is now far more expanded, less knowable, and more uncertain than ever, mainly because of man's efforts to control and re-create it. Theme parks are a superb response to this principle, a glowing showcase of the inside of our own minds. They are full of clues for the pursuit of what historian David Lowenthal has termed the "search for sensibility." The prime job of the modern historian (The Past is a Foreign Country, 1986), is the exploration of ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling that have shaped the past and are molding the present.

Engagement

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24 William Thompson, At the Edge of History. NY: Harper & Row, 1971, p. 21.

Philosopher Arnold Berleant, in his work on a book titled Art and Engagement[25] studies problems of presentation and experience in public environments. Berleant expresses the frustration of "museum fatigue" in this way: "No matter how interesting to me, I can't spend over an hour and a half in a museum. I always go home exhausted. There must be a better way to interact with collections."[26] There have to be better, less taxing ways to an exhibit-assisted education--and the key will lie in the entertainment modalities that theme parks have been affording their "guests," Disney's term for visitors, which he used advisedly. While even one hour may be considered a long time to spend in a museum (the North American average is actually closer to just 50 minutes), visitors routinely spend eight hours or longer strolling, sitting, eating, riding, and otherwise enjoying theme park environments. It is not unusual to find family or friends spending an unbroken week hard at play at Walt Disney World and EPCOT--and then returning home to remark how sorry they are that there wasn't time to see it all! Returning visitors are a major factor in the unbeatable attendance records (25 million a year at Walt Disney World) at these places.

Theme parks must process incredible numbers of visitors per day -- and at increasing rates. Recently, Walt Disney World's gates have had to close in mid-morning because of capacity conditions. But by ingenious planning and management of space, light, and noise control, they manage to avoid many of the problems museums and other exhibitors are experiencing by oversubscription, especially in the intimate intensity of science "discovery centers." Of particular concern to science parks is the difficulty of controlling hands-on exhibits that require concentrated one-on-one activity--especially difficult with those who stand most to

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25 A condensed version appears as a chapter, "Experience and Theory in Aesthetics," in Possibility of the Aesthetic Experience. M. H. Mitias, Ed., Dordrecht, Netherlands: Martinus Nijheff, 1986.

26 Personal interview, April, 1989, Philadelphia, PA.

benefit from them: school groups. "These exhibits are built for one-on-one, not 3,000 on one," says Wendy Pollack at the Association of Science-Technology Centers (ASTC).

One of the problems of designing good exhibits is just this situation: the more absorbing and personal, the more difficult to access. One solution to this problem posed at the theme parks are in the "dark rides," transporting the rider on an intimate and close-up "trip" through the exhibit in two-seat trams wired for sound. These modules give a feeling of privacy and "up-close" vision while they cut to almost nothing the feeling of crowding and competition for personal space and visibility that can compromise the best-laid exhibit design. For example, in the new exhibit "Body Wars" in the Wonders of Life pavilion sponsored by MetLife at EPCOT, the audience is "shrunk" to take a "Fantastic Voyage" through the human body via film and flight simulation technology. A neighboring attraction, "Cranium Command," takes viewers on a strange tour through the workings of the brain of a 12-year-old boy.

On the broad scale, within the sprawling megapark of indoor-outdoor "museumettes" at the Disney parks and EPCOT, visitor movement is very skilfully engineered: more so for being inobvious and invisible. The radius of walkways, paved with a rubber compound to lessen foot stress, is one strategy to sidestepping the chaos that could so easily be loosed upon these places with the wrong systems in place. The genius of the plan is that within any single theme area no "foreign" theme is allowed to intrude, reducing the "overchoice" or information overload that can plague the visitor who feels he is being offered too much at a time on too many plates--attractive as each one may be (a common complaint at World's Fairs, for example). The central medieval castle stands alone above other monuments as a navigators point. This is more than security and crowd control. It is am aesthetic of comfort and freedom as an answer the challenges of urban congestion. The result is

a national "field of care," or places charged with feeling, fondness, and connection for us all.

Evaluation

Assessment of the learning process is another vogue in which Disney, on a somewhat different front, has led the way. The lessons of the theme parks have already proven to be of unexpected but welcome assistance in addressing these problems.

In 1979 the National Science Foundation held a special symposium for science museums, at which a marketing researcher for Walt Disney World was invited to speak. The museum participants were somewhat astonished to learn Disney's annual budget for this activity--$1.5 million for visitor studies, including regular schedules for indexes from zip-code data to in-depth profiles. "At that point, museums were paying very little attention to their visitors, and a lot to their donors," says Minda Boren, Assistant Director of Programs at the Franklin Institute. "Over the past ten years, that has turned around." Now that museums increasingly depend on admissions income, the emphasis has begun to swivel considerably. Following the lead of theme parks, a consumer orientation is setting the tone for the way museums are reorienting along customer-service lines. They are asking how well their exhibits and programs are teaching and what they can do to reach more people more effectively. These are marketing questions. Museums, as well as churches, university presses, orchestras, and arts councils are learning to think like businesses -- in patterns already etched by the great entertainment centers Disney founded.

The stakes for theme parks, major cultural institutions, and education alike are somewhat similar in that all are "big-ticket items" within their categories. Marketing studies show that high quality (with a learning component) can motivate people to drive farther, pay higher entry fees, plan longer, and defer other

purchases. With recent price hikes at both theme parks and colleges, there seems to be no limit to what the consumer is willing to pay for these types of "quality" experiences.

The Greying of America

The nontraditional student is the newest target audience for higher education, and is here to stay. A glance at the demographics for the coming century should be instructive in correcting the notion that theme parks are attractive mainly to families with young children and to school groups. With the upward trend of life expectancy, already the ratio of adults to children in museums (science, leisure time) is over 3 to 2 (Source: ASTC). Contrary to their stereotype as a child's fantasy world, the Disney parks have always hosted far more adults than children--by a ratio of over 4 to 1. An interesting sidenote is that EPCOT reports a median age a full seven years higher than Disney World.[27] Disney World's mammoth scale, its vast acreage, and multitude of options, including new mini-parks such as Pleasure Island and Typhoon Lagoon, has led many visitors to view it as an adults-only experience and to leave the children at home. Increasingly, institutions of all types will be serving an older client base. By the year 2025, the Population Reference Bureau predicts, Americans over 65 will outnumber teenagers two to one.[28]

The upcoming generation of culture consumers, the baby boomers, will be the largest in history, and this is a cohort born and bred not only to continuing education in all its forms but to the theme park (where continuing education for credit is, in fact, now being offered).

Disney also offers its own brand of education. For adults (over 16), there are special lecture tours: "Hidden Treasures of the World Showcase," and "Gardens of the World." There are continuing education programs for credit in conjunction with

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27 Ken Dychtwald, Age Wave: The Challenges and Opportunities of an Aging America. LA: Tarcher, 1988, p. 133.

28 Dychtwald, Age Wave, p. 21.

Florida State University in Marketing and Communication. The Earth Shuttle Program offers class trips through EPCOT with special lesson plans. For 10-15-year-olds, there are the Wonders of WDW Program specializing in arts, nature, and entertainment.

In addition, EPCOT outreach and the EPCOT TEachers' Center provide a host of resources--print and electronic -- to educators and students to extend the learning curve sparked by the parks. A computer-driven exchange network for educators is up and running but looking for wider and better applications than just "teacher network." These efforts are all part of the Disney "continuing commitment to excellence in education," in the brochure phrasing.

Presentation philosophy as taught by Disney, together with the whole cadre of themeing means and motifs, can flex to fill in the many gaps that continue to pop open between what is taught and what needs to be learned. With the era of chalk and primer already far behind, the whole panoply of popular culture --private, nonprofit, business, and public -- offers itself as a rich and accessible research collection.

Properly plumbed and connected, the resources of the theme park offer exciting channels for the transformation of education into the well-rounded, interactive, and integrated adventure it must become in modern life.